

Wings of poetry, feet of power: Bird-banding in Bandelier

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For the Monitor

With great expectations about the next three months, I arrived in Albuquerque from Nicaragua at the end of July. After a two-hour drive, I began the discovery of my temporary home at Bandelier, a place full of history, culture, plants and animals exotic to my eyes.

The first two months have passed faster than I expected. It feels as if the seasons have changed at the pace of a film, recounting many years in

only a few dozen minutes. And just as with a fast-paced film, a few exceptional highlights are clear as I think back over my time in New Mexico.

My stay at Bandelier has been part of the National Park Service's Park Flight program—a program focusing on conservation of migratory birds using research and education in national park areas.

The particular program at Bandelier brings school children to see biologists catching songbirds in nets, putting small bands, like silver bracelets, on the birds' legs

and releasing each bird to continue its journey.

Within days of my arrival, I was stunned at the sight of 15 birds in one net. That was a number higher than I had ever seen during my bird work in Nicaragua. In moments, our bird-banding station was transformed into a rapid but careful workshop.

That first month was clearly "Juncoland" in my mind, as we banded more than 250 juncos—a kind of sparrow that winters and breeds as far south as central Mexico.

As August came to a close and the number of juncos falling into our nets declined, the emotion and exhilaration of seeing new birds maintained its cadence. One memorable moment was when a Sharp-shinned Hawk landed low in our nets.

After Steve Fetting, our boss and friend, finished putting the band on the bird, we released it to continue its job in the environment. It was an efficient and skilled hunter, sleek, slim, strong and agile.

September was the month of working with school kids. Pablo, my coworker from Guatemala, and I visited approximately 20 elementary school classrooms, with the always helpful company of Becky Shankland from PEEC (Pajarito Environmental Education Center).

The kids stunned us with their questions, answers to our questions and their cul-



HAWK This adult male Sharp-shinned Hawk was banded by Park Flight biologists at Bandelier National Monument on Aug. 26. They know this bird was an adult because of the very dark red eye color (rather than pale yellow in hatch-year birds), the blue-gray back color (rather than brown with rusty feather edges), and growing feathers in the wing and tail. Sharp-shinned Hawks breed throughout much of the forested parts of the United States and Canada. The species winters in the United States and as far south as Panama.

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Photos by STEPHEN FETTIG/Courtesy

EAGLE The toes of a Golden Eagle are nearly as large as man's fingers. With 1-inch talons, these can be dangerous feet. It takes all the strength of one researcher to firmly hold the legs of the eagle while a radio transmitter is attached. The solar-powered transmitter will be used to track the bird's movements by satellite for up to several years. Hawk Watch International has tracked previous eagles flying as far as Alaska and northern Canada after being banded in New Mexico.

tural connections with birds.

Early in October, I spent two weekends camping in the Manzano Mountains with a crew of observers from Hawk Watch International. This was another completely new experience, both in terms of camping at an elevation of 9000 feet and watching amazing migrating raptors.

One memorable moment was capturing a Golden Eagle. These strong birds of prey have feet with talons that can span an area as large as man's open hand. Whereas Sharp-shinned Hawks are color, grace and poetry, the Golden Eagle is pure strength. Both embody beauty from different places in our world.

Sometimes I am a little

homesick; sometimes I want to stay to learn and to experience more. But I need to return home soon. My time here is like a drop of water rolling down a smooth wall; my life flies onward.

Like so many migratory birds this fall, soon I will fly south, too. And like the eagles, hawks, and juncos, my thoughts will return to the mesas, mountains and canyons of New Mexico next spring.

Marvin Tórrez and Pablo Herrera will present "Cultures, Climates, and Critters – Stories about Guatemala and Nicaragua" at the PEECnic at the Pajarito Environmental Education Center at 3 p.m. Saturday.